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SUBJECT: FORMER ADVISER EXPRESSES CONCERN OVER EARLY DAYS
OF SHEIKH HASINA GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) One of the main architects of Bangladesh's return to democratic government expressed concern over early actions by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's new government. In a February 11 meeting with Ambassador Moriarty, Former Caretaker Government Communications Adviser Major General (rtd.) Ghulam Quader decried the politicization of the bureaucracy and Hasina's failure to follow through on promises she made to promote good governance. Quader said he believed Hasina wanted to change for the better Bangladesh's dysfunctional democracy, but was being undermined by underlings. Still, his analysis was not all doom and gloom. He said the new government's relations with the military appeared better than expected. He added that Hasina's government had a less cavalier attitude toward Bangladesh's historically endemic corruption. Quader urged the U.S. Government to use its influence to encourage Hasina to bring about meaningful democratic reform.

QUADER'S CRITICAL ROLE

12. (C) Ghulam Quader was an adviser in the 2007-2008 military-supported Caretaker Government that promoted democratic reforms and launched an anti-corruption drive to improve Bangladesh's notorious graft- and violence-plagued politics. (Note: Caretaker Government advisers were equivalent to ministers. End note.) He played a leading role in negotiating a return to democratic government between Bangladesh's two major political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and a wary military. Discussions with Awami League President Sheikh Hasina and BNP Chairwoman Khaleda Zia over continuing good governance reforms comprised a key component of the negotiations, which led to December 29 Parliamentary elections that were swept by the Awami League.

IS THE GLASS HALF EMPTY ...

13. (C) Although he looked relaxed in a sports coat and open-collared shirt, Quader told the Ambassador he sought a meeting with him to vent his pent-up anger over the initial weeks of the Hasina government. He began by decrying the politicization of a bureaucracy he said the Caretaker Government had taken great care to keep honest. He said the promotion of Awami League supporters created an "air of despondency (and) despair" within the bureaucracy, and he gave specific examples of senior bureaucrats he highly regarded who were shunted aside by the new administration.

14. (C) Quader said Sheikh Hasina was not yet abiding by some

of the many understandings reached during meetings with the Caretaker Government before the elections. (Note: To show how detailed the pre-election discussions were, he produced lengthy notes from one meeting for the Ambassador to examine. End note.) For example, Quader said he had asked Hasina to choose a finance minister from outside the party should the Awami League form the new government. He said she even mentioned a specific name -- a Bangladeshi living in America -- but ultimately chose AMA Muhith, who ran for Parliament on the Awami League ticket. He blasted other senior appointments, including the new head of the Telephone Regulatory Commission whom he described as having no qualifications for the post.

15. (C) The former adviser said he believed Hasina negotiated with the Caretaker Government in good faith and remained sincere about improved governance. He blamed the new administration's missteps on Hasina underlings such as adviser H.T. Imam, who he said was responsible for the politicization of the bureaucracy. He also faulted Sheikh Hasina's rivals in the Awami League Presidium for fanning violence among the party's student supporters that has been troubling the nation's universities since the elections. These and other problems in the early days of Hasina's rule, such as petty squabbling between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in Parliament, had led to what Quader described as an "alarming" loss of goodwill for the new government among Bangladeshis.

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16. (C) Still, Quader saw some silver linings in his generally dark analysis. For starters, he said official attitudes toward fighting corruption appeared to have changed for the better. He noted that Sheikh Hasina had filed a personal wealth statement and that big contracts, traditionally prime targets for graft, were being handled cautiously. Another positive sign was stable relations between the new government and the military. Many military leaders had been concerned a return to democracy would unleash a campaign of retribution because of the active army role in trying to oust Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia and many of their top lieutenants from politics. For all the problems, Quader said he believed the political situation would have been even worse without Sheikh Hasina, whom he described as the best bet among Bangladeshi politicians to lead the country. "She wants to change for the better," he said, but she is unclear how to do it. Quader predicted the next five years would be better than the inept and kleptocratic BNP rule of 2001-2006.

COMMENT: A PLEA FOR USG ENGAGEMENT

17. (C) Quader was among several Caretaker Government advisers who sought to use their brief time in office to create an environment under which reform of Bangladesh's dysfunctional democracy could take off. He clearly is worried about the legacy of his work and wants the U.S. Government to help Bangladesh avoid reverting to the status quo ante. Embassy officers will continue at every opportunity to urge the new government to follow through on its promises of democratic reforms to promote good governance. The Embassy will do all it can to help Hasina bring about the meaningful reforms that Quader himself believes she remains interested in pursuing.

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